

NEWS

Serbia and Albania Sign Deal on Freedom of Movement

Milica Stojanovic | Belgrade | BIRN | November 9, 2020 15:19

In a sign of warming relations between the two countries, Albania and Serbia on Monday signed a deal enabling citizens of both countries to enter the other one with only their ID cards.



Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama (R), Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic (L) and North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev (C) during a press conference in Ohrid, North Macedonia, November 2019. Photo: EPA-EFE/GEORGI LICOVSKI

President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic and Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama signed an online deal on Monday under which citizens of both countries can enter the other country with only their IDs, instead of with passports as was the case until now. After the ceremony, Albania's Rama hailed the agreement as "a positive step".

"It is a good step that now Albania has freedom of movement with basically all countries, including Serbia, with which we signed freedom of movement [deals] between our citizens – with no other document [necessary other] than ID cards. I think this is a very positive step," Rama told the online held press conference.

The Serbian President said he expected more citizens of both countries to cross over and visit Albania and Serbia.

"I am sure now that we have formally solved all obstacles that Serbian citizens can go not only to the territory of Northern Macedonia but also to the territory of Albania only with an ID card, and that there will be many more Albanians in Nis and Belgrade ... who want to see Serbia, but also many more Serbs who want to see Durres, Tirana and every other place in Albania," Vucic said.

The deal was signed during an online meeting of Vucic, Rama and North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev as a part of a regional so-called "mini-Schengen" initiative.

The three leaders signed a "mini Schengen" deal in October 2019, modelled on the passport-free zone of the EU initiative, envisaging free movement of people, goods, capital and services between the three countries. On that occasion, they said they expected all six countries of the Western Balkans to join the zone.

Kosovo signalled its wish to become part of the area in a deal signed in Washington with US President Donald Trump. Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina have yet to decide on the matter.

Since the war of independence from Serbia in Kosovo in the late 1990s, political relations between Serbia and Albania have been cool.

However, in the past few years, interest in Albania's tourist offer has grown in Serbia, as holidays on the Albanian coast become more popular.

In 2018, the Serbian and Albanian tourism ministries signed an agreement of cooperation designed to attract more foreign tourists – and encourage their own citizens to visit each other's countries.

Former Serbian tourism minister Rasim Ljajic then said that only 3,000 to 5,000 Serbian nationals visited Albania each year, while the number of Albanian tourists in Serbia was so small that they were not even registered.

The popularity of the Albanian coast has since risen, especially this summer when entry to Albania did not require a negative PCR test for COVID-19 or mandatory quarantine. For citizens of Serbia, with a high number of cases in July and August, and not being an EU member, Albania was among the few seaside destinations open for visits, besides the town of Neum in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Aleksandar Senicic from the National Association of Travel Agencies, YUTA, told BBC in Serbian that about five times more people decided to go to Albania this year than in previous years. However, he added that those numbers were still small. "In previous years about 1,000 to 1,200 people [in Serbia] spent their summers in Albania, and this year we expect 5,000 to 6,000 people to go there through the agency," Senicic told BBC in Serbian in August.

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At the same meeting, the leaders of the three countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation in the Fight against Covid-19.

North Macedonia Prime Minister Zoran Zaev explained that the memorandum covers sharing information about COVID-19, not requiring negative PCR tests for people entering those counties as well as treatment of patients from one country if they find themselves infected in one of the others.

"If a Macedonian citizen needs to be treated in one of these two neighbouring countries in which he is hospitalized, that country bears the costs. If our citizen needs to be treated in Albania or Serbia, he will not have to pay out of pocket. Also, citizens of Serbia and Albania will not pay out of pocket if they find themselves receiving treatment on our territory," Zaev said and added this will apply for all three countries.

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